[Four Families]

West Durham Cotton Mill

East Durham, N. C.

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I. L. M.

FOUR FAMILIES ON RESERVOIR STREET

Reservoir Street leads into the village where live the people who work in the East Durham Cotton Mill. In the first three houses on the east side of the street four families make their homes. Of the sixteen people comprising these families only four are willing to spend the remainder of their lives in a mill village. Two of the dissatisfied ones have endeavored to prepare themselves for work outside the mill. One girl of sixteen is struggling over almost insuperable difficulties to equip herself as a stenographer. One man took a part of a correspondence course in architecture during a few months last year.

The man is Arthur Hinson. He lives with his nineteen-year-old wife, Mae, in one half of the first house on Reservoir Street. Three years ago Arthur had a thousand dollars. He was the successful contestant in the Raleigh Walkathon. As he tread circle into circle around the Walkathon floor he often sang into the microphone such numbers as “They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree,” “Mountain Music,” and “Birmingham Jail.” Arthur became a hero among a growing circle of 2 friends. In less than a year his thousand dollars was gone. “He didn't have a cent of it when I met him,” Mae says. “We've been married a year now and they's been many ways we could of used it. He spent a sight of it foolish because he drank right bad before he was married,” she admits. “But he helped his family out some, too. They was ten of them and only him and his papa working.”

To begin housekeeping the Hinsons bought nearly $300 worth of furniture on the installment plan. They made a down payment of twenty-five dollars and now make weekly payments of three dollars. The three-piece modernistic bedroom suite cost $79 and the five-burner oilstove cost $80. For the kitchen cabinet , which is Mae's particular pride, the Hinsons paid $60. The breakfast room suite of fancy design and inferior wood cost $35. If the installments are met regularly for the next six months the furniture will be entirely paid for.

Arthur is ambitious to get along in the world and he has tried various schemes of self-promotion. Over a year ago he signed up with the International Correspondence School of Scranton, Pennsylvania for the course in architecture. When his wage was reduced and 3 his time cut he could not keep up the payments and the course was discontinued. He still owes $107 of the $200 fee. He receives letters regularly reminding him of his obligation.

Arthur wants to use the knowledge he acquired from his course in the carpentry trade. Mae says that he has tried on two or three occasions to get himself fired from his mill job in order that he might be eligible for a carpenter's job on the WPA. He hates the mill, particularly since his work has been almost doubled and his wages cut. He is considered the best doffer in the mill and the superintendent keeps him on. When he gets full-time work he makes $12 a week. During the past winter and spring he did not average over eight dollars a week. Arthur hopes to supplement his wage this winter by taking orders for men's and women's suits and raincoats.

Mae has great confidence in Arthur's abilities. She believes that once he breaks away from the mill he will be able to make a good living. She does not think the mill will ever offer him that advantage.

Mae has never had an adequate living herself but she takes pride in the fact that some of her relatives are property owners. She likes to / tell you that her 4 Grandfather Suggs owned a blackberry farm in Johnson County and that Suggs Mill Pond took its name from

her mother's people. She says that her grandfather's huckleberry farm was the largest in North Carolina but she is vague as to reasons why her mother did not share in the money obtained from the property when it was sold after her grandmother's death. She likes to tell you, too, that she has a cousin in Fayetteville who owns a store and several barber shops.

Mae, the second child in a family of four children, was six years old when her father died. “My mother scrubbed ditches and cleared new ground, working as hard as any man, for a dollar a day to raise us children,” she will tell you. “Sometimes she picked beans by the day and then us children could help some. My oldest brother started to work in a fish market at Mt. Olive for a dollar and a half a week. We lived on what him and Mama made, gettin' some clothes now and then from the Red Cross.” Mt. Olive stands out in her mind as a place where the people are extremely kind because none of the children in school ever ridiculed her for wearing Red Cross clothes. It was there too that her mother was awarded several prizes for her well-kept yard.

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Three years ago Mae's mother, worn out by many years of digging in the earth for a scanty subsistence, moved her family to Durham in hope of finding work in the cotton mill. For weeks she could secure no work of any kind except sack-tagging. Her family lived from hand to mouth on the small wages and what help they could get from the welfare department.

Mae got permission from the superintendent of the East Durham mill to learn to fill batteries. For two weeks she worked without a wage trying to do the job so well that the superintendent would hire her. “I was one happy soul,” she says, “when on the third Monday morning the superintendent come around and said he was going to put me to work.” A month later her mother also secured a job in the mill.

Mae worked for only a few weeks after she was married. Her health has never been good and it became worse after she went in the mill. While she was working she smoked a

package of cigarettes daily. Arthur thought that was not good for her health sa Mae quit smoking, only to pick up a few weeks later her old habit of snuff-dipping. Mae says she has had a craving for snuff as far back as she can remember. “Mama marked me with the snuff-craze before I was born,” she 6 explains. “When I was a little bit of a baby I'd stand at my aunt's knee and reach for her toothbrush. She started giving me a little dab of snuff on her finger when I was two year old.”

Pale and listless, Mae sits through most of her days hoping for the time when Arthur will have secured the job which will provide them with the things they want. “I don't have but four dresses and two of them is about wore out. I got so tired of wearin' them old clothes I don't know what to do. Sometimes I've thought about goin' to the relief to see what kind of dress they'd give me.” Without enough housework to keep her busy and without any recreational interest of any kind she simply sits and waits.

In the afternoons this summer Mae has helped Arthur a little in the garden. That garden has been of real benefit to them. They have had more butter beans than they could use and they have shared them with the Bensons who live in the other half of the first house on Reservoir St.

Sam Benson was reared on his father's fifty-acre farm in Johnson County. His father, John Benson, who could not write his own name married the young school teacher who came to teach in his community. Through 7 her influence and John's hard work they accumulated enough to buy and equip a fifty-acre farm. Here the elder Benson reared his three boys and three girls, working them in the fields and giving them hardly any time off to go to school. His wife taught the children at home and sent them to school only to take examinations. After this fashion Sam Benson finished the sixth grade.

Sam was fifteen years old when his mother died. It was the year before the price of cotton and tobacco began to soar. The Bensons, like their neighbors, entered into a hitherto unknown and unexpected prosperity. They spent money recklessly because they believed

easy money had come to stay. “Why, it wasn't at all unusual for me to stop my ploughing at eleven o'clock just to drive into Benson, seven miles from out house, to get me a coca-cola,” Sam relates. “Money come too quick to most of us and we never knowed how to manage it.”

Their greatest financial misfortune came to the Bensons whom the elder Benson entered into land speculation. Without the advice of his wife who had been his mainstay, he made unwise deals which led to the loss of his homestead.

Dissatisfied with farming as a renter, John moved his family to the cotton mill. There he hoped to save 8 money to buy land. After five or six years he saw that this hope would never be realized and he moved back to his home community and rented land where once he had been the owner. Sam with his young wife stayed on at the mill, cherishing the hope that had brought his father there. He was young and more years lay ahead. If he tried hard enough, maybe he could save enough to buy a small farm. Today most of his hope has vanished. He and his wife make a joint weekly wage of nineteen dollars and on that they and their three children live.

“They's no reason that I can see why I shouldn't be paid that much or more and me work full time” Sam argues. “My wife's place is at home anyhow, and we could come nearer savin' a little if she was here to look after things. As it is, what we make together won't cover our expenses for a bare livin'. We have to pay a girl to stay here and look after things when both of us are workin'. Unless conditions change a sight, my farm'll just be something I hope to have. If ever I do get anything ahead I want to get a piece of that same land we owned.”

Next door to the Hinsons and the Bensons, Eve Hardison, her husband and their three sons live. Her 9 fourth and youngest son is in a CCC camp in Oregon.

Eve greets strangers in an easy, friendly way. Her speech is better than that of most of her neighbors. One of eleven children, she was born on a small farm near Wilmington, North

Carolina. At eighteen she married Otis Hardison who was working as box-car carpenter for the railroad. While their children were still young they managed to save enough money to buy a lot on which they built a five-room house a few years later. “I was so happy, watching that house go up,” Eva says. “Papa had always said he hoped all of his children would live in homes of their own. The children were so proud of their new home, too. We had it all paid for when the Union called a strike. Otis was loyal to his Union and he wouldn't go back to work until he got orders from the Union. When he did go back the railroad wouldn't have him, and he couldn't get anything else to do.

“Finally we had to mortgage the home to get food,” she continues. “That was the last of our little place for us. It was a whole year before Otis got regular work, and it was too late then to start saving money for the mortgage even if he had been making enough so we could.

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“Otis got work in a cotton mill in Wilmington. In a year or two he had worked up to $18 a week. The thought of losing our home had got to where it didn't hurt so bad and we were taking great pride in our children. The oldest boy had finished the tenth grade and he said there wasn't anything that could keep him from finishing high school. The next to the oldest one was in the ninth grade and everybody said he had a good chance of being one of the best football players in school. That was in 1932 (?). There wasn't money out of $18, of course, to buy them clothes like they wanted to wear to school. Jim, the oldest one was always planning ways he could help himself. Well, when school was out we managed to get him in a CCC camp and I was to save the $25 a month he sent home so that he could have things like other boys during his Senior year. Then, the strike was called and Otis, who'd joined the textile union, walked out with the other strikers. The company opened the mill and sent out word for all the help to come back but it hadn't give to the workers any of the things they'd struck for. The Union told its members to hold out and they'd win the the end. Otis waited while one by one folks give in and went back to work. One morning he came to me and said 'I can't hold out no longer.

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We don't have a place to mortgage this time and I'm not going to stand by and see my family starve.' I looked at Otis and said, 'No, you're not going back now, Otis. I didn't want you to join this Union because I remembered what a strike had cost us. But you joined anyhow, and now you're not going back on the Union when it needs you. I'd rather starve then see you turn yellow.'

“I kept Otis out and when the strike was called off he went to ask for his job back. His boss man looked at him right hard and said, 'I'll let you know when we need you.' The next day we got our moving orders.

“Well, we moved out to an awful little house in another part of town and there we stayed. School started but Jim stayed on at the CCC camp. The $25 a month he sent home was all me, Otis, and the other three boys had to live on. You couldn't imagine unless you'd been through with somethin like it yourself how we suffered / that winter. We didn't have half enough to eat and no clothes at all. Day after day I had to sit and think of my boy in the CCC camp while his heart was set on finishing high school. And, Claude, the second one, wouldn't go to school 12 because he didn't have decent clothes to wear. I thought I'd go crazy seeing him look so sullen and bitter, and thinking maybe he blamed me because I had persuaded his Papa to stick by the Union.

“My boys had always attended Sunday School regular but since then the two oldest ones have never been inside of a church. Until yet I don't know how we lived through that winter. The year wore on and Jim was still at the CCC camp. We sold our furniture, and with the money we got came to Durham looking for work. Moving some distance away was the only way a striker could get a job. Durham strikers went to Wilmington and Wilmington strikers came here. It was a miserable year for them that had made an effort to get what they honestly thought was their rights. Folks who wasn't mixed up in it can't ever know how much punishment we had to take.

“They didn't ask us here if we had been in the Wilmington strike and if they had, we would have lied of course. Working people can't live without work, you know.

“After all I've suffered from the Union, I still believe that we've got to organize if we're ever paid a decent wage. The first thing we've got to get is the right to organize. Some people think we have that 13 now but it doesn't always work. Do you know what would happen to my husband at this mill if he so much as talked Union amongst the workers? They'd put him on a new job he didn't know how to do and give him three times more work then he could do. In a day or two his boss man would say “Guess I'll have to let you go since you can't keep up with your work.

“Another thing that makes it hard on the Union is the feeling folks hold against it who have been hurt by it. My two oldest boys are so bitter toward the Union they don't even like to hear the word mentioned. From what I've been able to understand in the papers the government is doing all it can to give workers the right to organize and I hope they'll be successful. I want to know for sure before Otis ever joins again. My life has been made hard by doing what seemed to be right and I don't want a threat hanging over me any longer. Me and Otis will live at the mill as long as we can get work, I guess, and I don't mind it at all. If he could get regular work and a good wage I'd just as soon be here as anywhere else. But my boys hate it and I pray for the day when they'll be able to find something else to do.”

During the past winter Otis and the two oldest 14 boys have worked when they could in the East Durham Mill. Some weeks only one of them had work and other weeks the three of them worked from one to three days. They are still paying for the new furniture which they had to buy when they moved to Durham. Their grocery account which they run with a local store is always in arrears. The boys, thwarted and bitter, contribute most of what they make toward household expenses and never mention the ambitions they once had.

Next to the Hardisons, Eunice Smith, her husband, Vernon, and their three children live. Eunice, whose father was a renter, tells how the family came to the mill. Her older brother, a tenant farmer who never did send any money from one year's end to the other, left home first to go to the mill. Later, a representative of the company came out and persuaded the whole family to do likewise. “They was scoutin' for help in them days,” Eunice recalls.

Eunice married at seventeen but she was twenty-eight years old before her first child was born. At the beginning of their married life she and Tom both worked and they had a fairly good living. Then when high wages came they bought things they'd only dreamed of before. “I bought me a piano,” Eunice says, “and 15 I've never played a note on it yet. Tell you how come I think I done it. When I was a child the Johnsons' — they was the ones that owned the place where we lived — had a piano and I used to think I'd give half my life to have one and to be able to play it. I reckin havin' them thoughts when I was a child was how come I bought one when I got the money. I done a lot of foolish spendin', but who knowed then that these awful times was ahead. Most of us at the mill had seen hard times all our lives and it was such a pleasure to us to be able to buy things we didn't have to have. Then too, livin' was higher than some may remember and they wasn't much chance to save as it sounds like when just wages by itself is mentioned. Well, we are livin' hard enough now and doin' a sight of work when we do get to make time.

“These three past years have been hard enough to make a body wonder if life is worth livin' atall. I've fought so hard to stay off relief that I think I cheated myself out of part of my work benefits. Otis wasn't gettin' any time atall in the mill last winter and some weeks I got one day and then again two. I reckin we could have been drawing work benefits but we hadn't signed up for it. At first I thought it was the same as signing for relief and I wasn't willin' yet to do 16 that, though I wonder now how we kept from starvin'. There was several months when the five of us lived on as little as three dollars a week. When I'd have as much as three dollars at a time I'd buy a twenty-four pound sack of flour and a bucket of lard. We lived off of biscuit bread and what stuff I'd canned the summer before. I reckin it

went harder with Lusette then any of us because she was throwed more with them that had then any of the rest of us. Then, too, she don't like living at a cotton mill. Me and Jim have always enjoyed cotton mill life well enough until it got to where we couldn't make a livin' at it. We'd be content to stay on the rest of our lives if we could get full-time work instead of two or three days like now when the work's so heavy that three days wear you out more then a full week did before we got the stretchout.

One of my boys wants to be a policeman and the other one wants to be a farmer. I won't worry about them for awhile yet. Right now I'm trying to help Lusette get fixed up for the kind of life she wants."

Lusette who is sixteen is the only daughter and oldest child. She finished high school in June. Sensitive, intelligent, and appealing, she has struggled 17 through every possible chance toward self-improvement. As a member of the Industrial Girls' Club of the [Y.W.C.A.?] she was sent to a State conference to represent her group. She cherishes the experiences she had there. With unbounded determination she went through her last year of high school when each day she felt that she could not keep on.

"Most people look back on their Senior year as a pleasant time in their lives, but I won't," she says. "I walked the three miles in to high school every morning because I didn't have money for bus fare. The walking wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't been afraid each day that my ragged shoes would fall apart before I could possibly get to school. Then, too, walking in the early morning can make you awfully weary when you haven't had any breakfast and not much supper the night before. Without decent clothes and without enough food I went every day and heard my classmates discuss their plans for the future. I didn't talk any because I was afraid even to think what my future might be.

"I worked as hard as I could at my typing and shorthand but I really didn't feel like I knew enough when school was out to start looking for a job. This past month I've been taking a review course under Miss Tenny. It's cost me twenty-five dollars and it had to 18 be paid

for out of the little bit Mama earns in the mill. The family had to sacrifice so I could have that money, but then, they got used to doing without most things this past winter. I'll make them proud of me one day, though. When I get a job I'll help the boys and they'll have happier memories of their senior year than I have of mine.

“It won't be so awfully hard to get a job, will it? The other day I asked Miss Tenny if it wasn't time I was sending out applications. She said, why yes, she thought so, and then asked me who my father's business friends were. I told her my father was a hard-working cotton mill hand and he had no business friends. But surely I can get a job on my own. I'll have to, because I can't stand to live all my life at a cotton mill village.”